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# Carter tries again on radar plane sales to Iran

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Through heavy lobbying and promises of tight security, President Carter seems to be winning his battle in Congress to sell expensive radar planes to Iran.

But congressional liberals contend that in selling seven sophisticated airborne warning and control systems (AWACS) aircraft to Iran, Mr. Carter will undermine the credibility of his new arms sales policy.

In last year's election campaign, Mr. Carter expressed great concern over America's role as an arms merchant, and, once elected, promised to reduce U.S. military sales, now close to \$9 billion a year. The President set down guidelines that would, among other things, prohibit the introduction of any advanced weapons system to an area that did not have it.

The AWACS planes would be new to the Middle East, and their sale alone — not to speak of the support systems associated with them — will total \$1.2 billion. But Mr. Carter explained that in the case of the AWACS, he was making an exception to his policy.

In congressional hearings, administration witnesses argued that Iran was of great strategic importance and that the AWACS were needed for "regional stability." But they ran into unexpectedly heavy resistance — partly on the grounds that the AWACS sale violated Mr. Carter's own policy — and lost an important House subcommittee vote.

Mr. Carter is now making a second try, and congressional sources say that the administration's effort is much better orchestrated. The President has written letters to congressmen urging the sale's approval. He argues that Iran needs the planes as a central part of its defense system, that their sale will help foster "stability" in the Persian Gulf, and that a good relationship with Iran helps to assure the uninterrupted flow of oil to an energy-short world.

Some congressional sources suspect that in addition to these justifications for the AWACS sale, the administration is interested in using the sale to lower the per-unit-costs of the planes in preparation for possible similar sales to NATO countries. And some sources say — perhaps most important of all — that the President may be trying to fulfill previous commitments to the Shah of Iran, made by the Nixon and Ford administrations, agreements which have not been fully disclosed.

Whatever his motives, Mr. Carter appears to be succeeding in breaking down some of the resistance to the sale by providing Congress with a list of assurances as to security measures that will be taken to ensure that sophisticated equipment from the planes will not fall into the hands of the Soviets. The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Admiral Stansfield Turner, earlier had voiced concern over possible dangers in this aspect of the sale but is now reported to be confident that the security measures will provide adequate protection.

Critics in the Congress argue, in the meantime, that Mr. Carter's "new" arms sales policy is beginning to look like the old one, particularly when it comes to the Shah of Iran. It is Iran, they say, which has set the pace for a great wave of arms exports to the Middle East. And this amounts, they point out, to the biggest build-up of conventional weaponry that the world has seen in recent years.